Lamb's Breath

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Lamb's Breath

by Nerve_Itch

Summary

> This doesn’t feel like courtship, or like romance. It feels cruel, and in some controlled way, violent. It feels, Will realises, like something he can understand. Like something he deserves. Something larger than himself, and a way to lose himself in the orchestrations of someone who might know him, but more importantly, knows best.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Introduction

There's a thing that Will Graham does when he feels ungrounded. It goes unnoticed, by most.

Bev's noticed. She's seen the ways that he moves at a crime scene; catalogues the way Will blinks in rapid succession, how his limbs start moving in twitches. She watches the aspirin disappearing in clenched fists, and she sees the way that Will swallows, hard, holds his breath inside himself and lets it out in short, stunted stutters. For Bev, it's just how Will is. Nervous, breathless, acerbic and looking increasingly in need of a few beers and a chance to loosen some of those coils trapped inside his skin.

She's asked him, a couple of times now. He's declined both times.

Bev lets it slide, but the next week, when they're counting organs and cataloguing prints of arterial spray and Will's a quaking breath in the middle of the lab, she asks again.

This time, Hannibal's watching. And Hannibal's noticed.

"I don't think I'd be good company," Will offers by way of polite rebuttal. He doesn't sound pitiful when he says it; more that his pragmatism extends far enough that he's certain he knows well enough when he'd slowly suck the life from an environment, and is making his claim based solely on a set of equations linked to his ever-wavering moods. That, and his session with Hannibal was scheduled to start thirty minutes ago. That part, he keeps quiet.

"None of us are good company, Will," says Bev, as though it's the most obvious and irrelevant excuse Will could have volunteered. "That's the point of drinking."

"It's been working for me for years," adds Price. "Besides, you can't be worse company than Zee."

Zeller's left eyebrow conveys no small amount of indignation.

"No one's gonna make you, but there's a lobster bar ten minutes from here. I'm guessing you eat?"

Will strokes his fingers across the metal table with a touch that raises Zeller's other eyebrow. "Nothing like the sight of someone's spleen to work up an appetite," he says.

He's smiling, but his breathing's gone still again. Electricity buzzes across the silence.

"Hannibal?" asks Bev, and it was meant to sound like an invitation, but it sounds like she's asking him to decide on Will's behalf.

"I'm afraid I have duties to attend to back home. I can provide a lift if it's required?"

Will nods, lets his breath out in short pushes, fiddles with his glasses. His discomfort is palpable, and Bev, being Bev, smiles as though it's the most ordinary thing in the world because within the context of everything they do, it might as well be. "Your loss," she says, and it's friendly, exasperated and guarded all at once.

They stream out of the same exit, and Will's breathing properly, again, until he hits the parking lot and the shapes of Bev, Price and Zeller slope away leaving him stood in the dark with Hannibal. It's just a small touch that halts him; a broad hand against the small of his back, warm even through the layers of clothes. And Will hesitates, stutters on air as Hannibal guides him to the passenger seat of his Bentley.

"We can postpone our appointment until next week," Hannibal offers as Will sits himself down, blinking indignantly as Hannibal leans over him to secure the seatbelt. "But I must insist on you eating something, of my preparation if you will allow it."

"Thanks."

During the journey, Hannibal doesn't press Will for conversation. Instead, he listens to his breathing, to how it thins when his eyes close, made light and urgent by whatever thoughts of the day are haunting him, and how it levels, deepens when his posture relaxes into the car seat. His fever colours the scent of the air, and this, thinks Hannibal, could be very interesting indeed.

Will is fully awake when they reach Hannibal's home, presumably buoyed by the prospect of something to eat, and reprieve from thoughts of death. He lets Hannibal hang his jacket up for him, and is guided to the dining room. He accepts the bulbous glass placed in front of him filled with something honey-gold in colour, not pausing to sniff at it or swill it before taking a large gulp.

"Preparation will take a few moments," Hannibal says, topping up the glass and exiting to the kitchen. Will sits, alone, yet without the comfort of solitude.

Hannibal isn't surprised to see the glass empty when he returns some short minutes later, the smell of stew and baking bread filling the downstairs. He refills it, again, and takes up a chair next to Will's.

"It will be another half hour," Hannibal says, watching the way Will licks at his lips. "I trust your hunger can be allayed until then?" Hannibal adds, knowing that Will is exhibiting all signs of being past famished.

"Thank you," Will says instead, hands stroking the glass and breath getting off kilter, again.

"Perhaps we could use the time to talk about today?"

Will smiles, resigned. "Now you've seen me in my element."

“I’d dispute that seeing you dissecting the dead is truly your element,” offers Hannibal. “I daresay you don’t belong in the steel rooms of the morgues and laboratories Jack puts you in so often.”

“*Belonging* isn’t generally the sort of thing we get to choose for ourselves though, is it?”

“On the contrary. We find places and ways to belong in the most unlikely of circumstances.”

“I’m sure by the time I end up on one of those trays I’ll have finally found my place.”

“Will.”

Will startles, as though being reminded that this is a conversation with two participants. Hannibal holds a hand out, hovers it beneath Will’s nose as though testing the breath of an unconscious patient.

“Are you aware,” Hannibal asks, “That you hold your breath when you feel attacked?”

Will pushes the hand away and reaches again for his glass. “I don’t feel *attacked*, doctor.”

“And yet you’re holding yourself in. You may find that withholding oxygen is only worsening your headaches and heightening your anxiety reflexes.”

“I thought we were delaying our session until next week.”

Hannibal reaches for Will’s hand before he can reach for the glass, and again, there’s that musical rush of inhalation that goes no further than his throat.

“Forgive me,” says Hannibal, with the comfortable audacity of one who knows that their actions will be permitted. “I cannot pass up an opportunity to provide guidance when you are seeking it so plainly.”

Will doesn’t think that he is seeking guidance, or the touch that still sits heavily on his arm, or the intrusiveness that is coming to define his interactions with Hannibal. But, he reasons, he’s also prone to ingratitude, and this is his paddle, after all.

“You want to remind me to breathe?” Will asks, careful to measure out his inhales and exhales with guarded precision.

“Quite.”

Hannibal stares at him, allows the hesitancy and curiosity to chisel frown lines into Will’s face.

“I’d like to try something, if you’ll allow it.”

Hannibal knows that Will is going to allow it, knowing that Will has yet to master the assertiveness or confidence in his own mind that would let him challenge it.

“Close your eyes, Will.”

Will does as he's told, ragged from tiredness and hunger, not quite lucid enough to articulate any reason to protest.

Hannibal moves silently from his chair, positions himself behind Will, and lowers his voice until it's barely louder than a pulse.

"Concentrate on how this makes you feel."

Before Will can answer, Hannibal has wrapped his right hand across Will's mouth and his left is pinching his nostrils closed.

Three seconds pass with a rushing, twitching tension. Heat radiates from Will's face, and from his neck as he swallows.

On the fourth, Will moves to claw Hannibal's hands from his airways. His fingers scrabble, and Hannibal remains steadfast for another two seconds.

On the seventh, Will swings himself sideways, wriggling out of Hannibal's grip, elbow sending the glass flying from the table. He takes breath back into his lungs in urgent, hungry gulps.

"How did that feel?" asks Hannibal, nonplussed by the fragments of glass at his feet, nor by Will's reddened face.

"How do you *think* it felt?"

Hannibal kneads at Will's shoulders, unpicking the knots there with measured pressure. Will's chest heaves and his fingers shake.

"How it would feel for me would be very different to your experience," Hannibal says, excruciatingly calm. Will finds himself drowning in it. "I want to hear your interpretation."

"I assumed panic was a universal response," Will says, reluctantly easing into the touch at his back as his shoulders unfurl beneath Hannibal's touch.

"It felt," Will continues, voice loosening, "like the fear of letting everything go just became manifest. Like I was irrelevant within those few seconds. Like freefall."

Hannibal makes a noise which sounds like satisfaction.

"Is it not unlike the sense of freefall you experience when you work, with all those thoughts swimming through you in currents you can't suppress?"

"Like building a dam and having it smashed down," Will agrees.

Hannibal loosens his tie, pulling it from him soundlessly.

"I'd like to help you with those dams."

Will expresses something like hesitancy, a loose sound in his throat that isn't wholly verbal. The silk of Hannibal's tie slips over his wrists where they hang loose against the chair, and a breath later, they're joined together behind him, tethered with a knot against the wooden chair back.

"Doctor?"

"If I believed conventional therapy would have been of any use to you, I'd have referred you long ago, Will."

Will swallows, reassessing the bounds of the new dynamic as it forms around him.

"Concentrate on your breathing, Will."

Will isn't able to focus on anything else as that warm hand folds across his mouth, gripping his jaw and he can breathe through his nose, just; it's a thin, wheedling thread of air that's getting trapped in his nostrils, jammed near his sinuses and it's not enough, not quite. His head feels heavy, too hot. He's shifting in his seat, resisting the pressure on his wrists and then pulling against them. Hannibal's body holds the chair firm, and then there are fingers against his nose and the thin thread of air disappears.

Will knows he should trust Hannibal; should trust that he won't let him suffocate, that he'll know when to stop. And he's sucking against Hannibal's hand, pressure rising in his lungs. He can't focus. He can't do anything. He thinks that might be the point of this exercise; to prove how little control he has over it all. He stills, hopes the building carbon monoxide in his lungs will find a way out, eventually. And he feels his body resisting in other ways; the muscles in his neck thrumming like the wings of a felled bird, the searing burn in his lungs sinking lower, through to his gut; feels the clenching of his stomach and the knotting feeling behind his groin. He hasn't counted the seconds, this time, but it's been too many.

"Stay with me, Will."

There's red at the sides of Will's visions, and the threads of his thoughts have all severed.

He's pulling, all of him is pulling, burning and frantic.

"Good," comments Hannibal, and he lifts his hands away as though revealing some great display.

Will's head drops as he gasps at the air, not enough, still. Hannibal's hands are in his hair, stroking, kneading, soothing.

"Did you feel the dam of your thoughts building, then?"

Will coughs before he answers. "I'm not sure this metaphor is sustainable, Hannibal."

"You once spoke of fortresses, then. Is that more suitable?"

Will shifts awkwardly in the chair, aware that he's too hot, too confined, too *vulnerable* with Hannibal so closely entwined in his personal space and still outside of his eye line and his

pants feeling tight when they really, really *shouldn't*.

"Tell me what associations broke through your barriers this time, Will."

"Nothing more eloquent than an absence of control, *doctor*."

"And to you that lacks eloquence?"

Hannibal's hands have dropped to Will's collarbones, to the back of his neck. The touch is still firm; a massage, disguised as something more intimate, perhaps.

"Are your methods always this unconventional?" Will asks instead. His voice is thinner, his nerves hovering at the edge of it. This open, Hannibal thinks he could pluck each one from its thread and create a twine with which to hold Will indefinitely.

"In this moment you are not my patient."

Will nods, comprehension still sitting slightly out of reach of his thoughts.

"Then what am I, in this moment?" His pants are tighter now, still hidden by the edge of the table, but he feels the bloom rising in his cheeks.

"Hopefully," says Hannibal, his hands withdrawing, "on the cusp of a revelation that when you feel overwhelmed and powerless, it won't always be a pleasureless experience for you. Unless of course I have misjudged."

Will struggles to find the words, the justification, the means to process the promised revelation. This isn't how he *does* things. He doesn't let people understand him, and he definitely doesn't let people *do* anything with the perceptions they form. And above all, he doesn't let himself be made vulnerable to another person. Therapy, and Hannibal, were concessions he made. And yet, his cheeks are burning and his dick is starting to hurt at the thought of Hannibal's hands pinning his airways shut, and his hands are still knotted to the chair and all he can think to say is that Hannibal is *right*. His throat closes on the words, too ashamed to agree to them, and Will wants to blame the wine, the fever, the subverted trust he'd placed in Hannibal as his doctor, not his…whatever this is.

"Will?"

"You haven't misjudged."

"Then you'll agree to pursue this?"

Will nods his agreement as Hannibal unknots the ties at his hands. There are questions ready to burst from his tongue; whether Hannibal is offering this solely as a kindness being the first. Being Will, he doesn't trust himself not to fuck up the gentle offering of intimacy, and so he remains silent as Hannibal places the burgundy tie on the table next to him. A promise, of something still defined only sweepingly.

Will doesn't know what to do with his hands. All of him is floundering, and so he focuses on his fingernails, sees the dirt wedged beneath them and wonders if it's the sort of thing that

might bother Hannibal, or if he's already imposing a set of expectations onto what's emerging between them before he has a chance to understand what it could be. He tucks them into his palms all the same, waiting, hoping that Hannibal will continue to govern the progress of the evening. He's not good at taking the lead.

Hannibal does; by leaving the table at a speed which conceals the expression of his face and any tension in his pants.

Will's mouth is dry as he concocts possibilities of what is to come next, and finds that fear still colours most of his imaginings. He also learns that this association is doing nothing to quell his arousal.

Hannibal's return is signified by the potent smell of rosemary, of rich vegetables and dough, and an array of plates and cutlery that Will had not anticipated, his thoughts of hunger having been driven from him.

Hannibal observes Will's carefully suppressed disappointment and says nothing of it, peppering the elegantly presented stew and breaking a chunk of warm bread to sit atop the salad on the side of the plate.

"Woodland venison stew," he announces with infuriating levity, taking his seat to Will's side and allowing his fingers to brush against the tie laid out between them. "A simple dish, but no less nourishing I hope."

"It smells fantastic," Will says, his stomach reminding him that for all his body is fighting to be attended to, his hunger isn't wholly repressible.

For a relatively small portion of food, the time it takes to consume it seems vast. Pleasantries are exchanged; compliments addressed to the flavours, the lateness of the hour, and nothing is said of the earlier promise.

"Would you care for dessert?" Hannibal asks as their plates finally clear.

Will falters, unsure if it is meant as an innuendo or whether they are to embark on some other culinary feast.

"Raspberry soufflé with honeyed almonds."

A course devoid of innuendo.

Will watches as slivers of red and pink are folded beneath Hannibal's teeth, and thinks about losing himself in that same wet darkness. Hannibal watches himself being watched, and smiles. The pressure inside Will's pants has dissipated, not yet to a point of comfort, though the tie still sits between them. It's enough reassurance, just, that Will didn't imagine the earlier exchange.

"I trust this has helped to replenish your waning energy?" Hannibal asks, clearing their dishes from the table. It's strange, hearing him talk of meals as though they were mere means to biological ends, and then Will thinks that it's strange that he *noticed* its strangeness.

“It was delicious, thank you.”

Hannibal returns, looking satisfied. And, to Will’s mild dismay, looking utterly relaxed with no whisper of the tension he’d been hoping for.

“The drive to Wolf Trap is a long one,” Hannibal says, and Will feels a weight growing in the depths of his stomach. “I have a spare room if you’d prefer.”

Will knows he can’t have concocted the earlier events; the tie is still sat there, within reach of his fingertips if he flexes them. Instead, he finds himself imagining what could have transpired throughout the course of their meal to effect such a change in Hannibal’s wishes, or apparent lack thereof. Hannibal is standing, facing him. one hand resting on the other side of the tie. His expression is utterly impassive.

Silence hangs for a few seconds longer as Will measures out breaths, tries to find a way to express something other than keen disappointment.

“Or,” suggests Hannibal, “You could consider asking for what you want?”

Will finds his voice. “I thought that was established earlier, doctor?”

“And yet you are fearful of speaking it now.”

Will finds that he does not like being confronted in this manner. He doesn’t like confrontation of any nature, but he’s selective as to which baits he’ll rise to. This one…this one seems to be attached to something larger, sharper than he can willingly bite, not without coercion. Assistance.

“I think…”

The hesitation is deliberate; it’s a pause he’s hoping Hannibal will fill. Hannibal doesn’t.

“Perhaps this isn’t the most opportune of moments?” Will suggests.

“Perhaps not.”

Will tries to read anything in Hannibal’s face that might offer a clue, guidance, an indication of how irreversibly he’s culled the potential of what Hannibal had offered him. He sees nothing but a downward slant of Hannibal’s lips, and allows himself to be steered from the dining room.

“I’ll call a cab,” Will says, and his skin feels cold, clammy and like it’s not fully containing all of him in this moment.

“Will.”

This time, Will notices that he’s stuttering on air when he stills, waits for Hannibal to tell him what to do.

“The guest room will offer you a night of undisturbed sleep,” Hannibal says, leading the way, walking them past the front door. “I insist.”

Will doesn’t say that he doesn’t believe that any period of time with his mind as company could be considered undisturbed.

“Thank you,” he says, because the word “no” is still too distant from his tongue.

Hannibal opens the door to a spacious bedroom, decorated in navy blues and ice greys. A portrait of a dog sits above an empty dresser. The bed is larger than Will’s own, and already the plushness of the covers seems practical, if not inviting.

“Curious,” says Hannibal as he ushers Will inside, “That you default to flight when I have no doubt that the fight in you is a much stronger instinct. Goodnight, Will.”

Will blinks at the sight of the closing door, listens to the rushing of blood in his eardrums blocking out the sound of Hannibal’s retreating footsteps. He dwells on Hannibal’s words as he nestles beneath the covers, wondering how it came to be that whatever his instincts may have been, Hannibal found a way to override them all the same.

The next morning begins too early; a phone call, from Jack. It’s 5:45, and no fit time to be asked what Will knows of historical torture instruments, or the motivations one might use to employ them on local councillors. For once, Will experiences a pang of gratitude; there’s a certainty in the horrors of his job that he’s not currently getting from Hannibal and the unspoken questions between them. He stands mute in the kitchen as his host – because that’s a pleasant, neutral way to think of Hannibal in this moment – percolates coffee and promises to drive Will to the adjoining state to immerse his mind in some new inevitable trauma. Will waits until 7:00 when he’s in Hannibal’s car, until he calls Alana, asking if she could call in on the dogs. Hannibal says nothing as Will assures her that he’s fine, really. That nothing more sinister than tiredness kept him from his bed, and yes, he knows Jack’s wringing him dry right now, but he wouldn’t be going if he didn’t think it would do some good. He doesn’t ask Alana how she is. Hannibal lets him out of the car a block from the scene, agreeing that it may invite unnecessary speculation.

“Perhaps when we’ve established something for them to speculate about,” he tells Will, handing him a brown paper bag tied with string. “Lunch,” he offers, and Will’s head floats momentarily, wholly ungrounded by the swivelling perceptions of what is and what isn’t and what might be promised.

“See you in three days,” Hannibal says, and this time, there’s a smile when he speaks. The kind of smile that shows teeth, and Will thinks of them biting holes into him and swallowing him whole, and he finds himself smiling back.

Actualisation

Chapter Summary

Here it is!

The day of Will's next appointment – because it's helpful, still, to consider this an appointment – arrives with typical anxiety. His classes seem to stretch on without end. In the last one, he flashes through the slides of his most recent scene; the prospective senate lying prone on a table, a metal pear stretching and splitting the seams of his mouth. Imagine, he tells the students, what it means to take someone apart that way. Think about, he tells them, what it's like to have a person, a living, breathing, pleading person, whom you can exert your control over in this way. And then think, he tells them, what you'd want to do next. What new damages you'd want to inflict on people, once the thrill of simply holding them still and breaking them felt too insubstantial. And then, he asks them, think about why the perpetrator of this crime got caught. How their antique purchases were all the link they needed to find a work address, how something so simple could have stopped them from escalating their depravity.

He doesn't ask them to imagine how it feels to be stood in the middle of that room, with the musty stench of meat left out too long and the congealed threads of bodily fluids streaked across the linoleum. He doesn't want them to speculate about the panic that breathes its way into the spaces and the cracks, that whispers through the reconstruction about what that kind of power over someone might mean. Or what it feels like to really, truly be at its mercy.

And he doesn't tell his students what to do in those situations where you dwell too long on the prospect of being held, completely, at another person's whims, and how to conceal the fact that your dick's started twitching in your pants and your colleagues are stood three feet from you.

He doesn't mention that in those situations, it helps to be thought of as unbalanced, unstable even. Because it provides the necessary excuse to run out of the room in a flurry of sweat and spend the next twenty minutes clawing crescents into his palms until his guilt, and boner, can get themselves under control again.

He misses out that part, and yet his cheeks burn with the memory as he flicks through the slides.

His class finishes without ceremony, and he continues to ignore his students as they hand him papers from an assignment he doesn't remember setting.

Hannibal appears in the doorway, and that burning flush returns to his skin more fully than before.

"An illuminating lecture," he comments, and Will notes that his presence at his desk is speeding the path of the remaining students out of the hall.

"Are you making it your habit to observe all areas of my work?" Will asks, careful to omit the title of doctor while there are still students within earshot.

"I confess that I was curious about what may have transpired since our last meeting."

"Isn't that what the appointment is for?" asks Will, as the last of the students exits the hall.

"I rather hoped we could cover more substantial ground if I were to give myself a head start."

Will swallows, his throat rapidly drying and clogging with the sorts of words he doesn't quite know how to speak.

"I'd like to cook for you again, perhaps after our allotted time?" Hannibal asks, only he's asking in that way that doesn't allow for any answer other than the one he requires.

"I'd like that. Thanks."

Will gathers his papers as Hannibal watches, and accepts the cue to leave, not commenting that even with heavy traffic, leaving this early in the day will place them at Hannibal's office some hours earlier than the prescribed appointment time.

"I'll drive. Your car will be safe here, I'm sure." Will nods, climbs into the passenger side of Hannibal's Bentley and reaches for the seatbelt before Hannibal can do it for him. "You seemed hesitant to commit to a decision of any nature last time, so you'll allow me to guide as I see fit?"

Will thinks back to his classroom and the slides of the dead, without the means to control their own outcomes, and agrees. His breath comes out in short flurries, and Hannibal doesn't comment, just looks at Will and inhales. He's wearing the same burgundy tie.

"How are your headaches?" Hannibal asks as the engine purrs into gentle traction. "Have you experienced any more episodes?"

"I'm not wholly sure what constitutes an episode and what's an extension of reality."

"Then perhaps we should work on grounding you. In those times when the current of your subconscious swells, it would serve you well to have an anchor to remain tethered to."

Will thinks of drowning, and then of tethers, and his skin burns inside his clothes.

"I'm never sure how literal you're being," Will tells Hannibal. "That's deliberate, isn't it?"

Hannibal smiles, warm, though his eyes remain on the road.

“Of course.”

The drive is a quick one and the sky has barely dimmed by the time they reach Hannibal’s office. Will hesitates at each threshold, waiting for Hannibal’s cues to guide him to remove his coat, to step through to the vast office space, to sit in the armchair and to accept the glass of rose coloured liquid as Hannibal takes his seat opposite him.

“I want you to tell me about the last scene you attended.”

“You *saw* the last scene I attended, doctor. Wasn’t that the point of you visiting the lecture? Your head start?”

“Perhaps the point of the question was to see how quickly your defences rise when you feel a lack of trust.”

Will reaches for his glass, unsure of whether to risk the chemical dulling of his defences or whether to remain without a familiar crutch. He takes a sip, then two more before he answers.

“Is this a test of how much I’m able to trust you?”

“I am not the one being tested,” Hannibal says. “You find yourself seeking balance, and anchors. You know this, and yet you’re bolting at the opportunity to accept it.”

“I wasn’t aware that the opportunity was fully…present, yet.”

“Then should we talk of how you felt in the middle of those crimes of violence and control, of how you flushed at the thought of death because it meant someone else putting a stop to the freefall…” begins Hannibal, plucking the near-empty glass from Will’s fingers, “…or should we begin?”

“Begin, please.”

Hannibal stands to rest Will’s glass on the desk, keeps his back turned as he loosens his tie, and reaches into his desk drawer. Will watches, head swimming as he regards the black box being placed on the top of the desk.

“The point of this is to take you to the precipices of your fears, and to then allow me to guide you back from them. Your colleagues may see you each day, but they are not equipped to assist you.”

Will nods, then flinches as fingers tease through his hair and something stiff slides over his eyes. He feels the gentle touch of a knot securing at the back of his head.

“Won’t this encourage co-dependency?” he asks. “Won’t be able to claw myself back from any precipice unless you’re there to assist?”

The room goes still. Too still. Quiet enough that the doubt that he’s committed some misstep has the room to breathe, and swell.

“You cannot find stability in yourself, Will.” Hannibal’s breath is tickling the back of his ears. “Allow yourself at least one source of it, please.”

Will is guided, through light touches at his elbows, and heavier ones at his sides, to a standing position, and then across the room to where the pillars of the office provide support for his back.

Something soft, silken and almost alive wraps across each wrist in turn, and this time Will knows he’s holding his breath; feels the anticipation crawling inside him like larvae occupying the skin of the freshly dead. The transmutation from anticipation to dread is quick, and thorough.

Something feels *off*.

He’s less sure that it’s to do with vulnerability, and more to do with the incongruity of the set up. Hannibal’s doing this for him, because of him. And yet somewhere in this is the intangibility of what Hannibal wants from this. Will thinks back to his lecture, to the killer who’d pulled apart his victims to wrench their screams into being, who’d been motivated by little more than the simple reason than that they *could*. Their victims were less important than the suffering that could be inflicted on them.

His wrists are pulled apart, linked behind the pillar.

“Test that, please,” Hannibal asks, and his breath is closer than his voice. Will pulls, feels his arms move no more than a fingernail width and feels the tension against each part of his wrists, biting at the bone.

He can’t consolidate the coolness of Hannibal’s actions with the hot promise of what it’s doing to him, and already the heat feels too much, too thick.

“This will not be entirely comfortable for you,” Hannibal says, and his voice is further away.

“I’m not expecting it to be.”

Hannibal’s warm breath is close again, and his fingers tease at the end of Will’s hair. They dance across Will’s jaw, and Will’s breath jerks away in response. Something cold and elastic stretches across the skin in the wake of Hannibal’s touch, covering skin with broad rubberised sheets and wrapping Will’s barely open mouth, across his face and then behind the pole until Will’s head is held taught. His nostrils flare, still permitting a passage of air to his lungs, but thin. Insubstantial.

He knows he can endure this, because he’s already endured this.

Knots form in his gut.

“Remember, Will. You do not have to try and control this. You simply have to let it happen.”

His groin heats, pools blood. Touch sparks across his skin as the buttons on his shirt open, and warm hands skim the skin of his stomach. He coils and recoils with as much movement

as he's afforded, and there's breath on his forehead, whispering through his hair and heating the sweat as it forms.

This doesn't feel like courtship, or like romance. It feels cruel, and in some controlled way, violent. It feels, Will realises, like something he can understand. Like something he deserves. Something larger than himself, and a way to lose himself in the orchestrations of someone who might know him, but more importantly, knows best.

"I want you to think of those bodies you taught your class about," Hannibal says, and now the oxygen isn't quite reaching the back of Will's throat. "I want you to imagine how they felt in those moments when their limbs had been stretched out past endurance."

Endurance, Will understands. It's the thing that kicks in when there are no other options. His body and brain are already acclimatised to it as a concept, intimately.

"Think of the moment when their fates were no longer feared, but actualised," continues Hannibal, and his voice is distorting. The material stretches over the bridge of Will's nose, and there's barely a space for air, the pressure building against the bone, pressing the skin of his nostrils to a near close.

The difference between the endurance Will knows, and this, is that with this, there's a promise of someone taking the pressure away from him at the end of it.

His skin feels sticky with sweat and his pants are too close around him and the only air he can reach is thinner than a cotton thread. Hannibal is telling him to think, still, and Will *can't*; his pulse is thundering through his eardrums and his eyes are stinging and he's tugging at his wrists, fighting to do something, *anything* to stop the burn in his neck and get some life back into him. That's when Hannibal teases his fingers beneath the zipper of Will's pants, and this touch he's been waiting for is something he can't *feel*. He's sucking at the covering over his mouth, tasting plastic and salt and Hannibal's misjudged this, he's suffocating him and he can't *scream*, can't communicate anything. He's trembling against the pillar, veins strung taut across his skin.

"Let go," Hannibal tells him, his voice a rolling wave of certainty.

Will can't; he's got nothing to let go of.

He thinks of struggling, of fighting, and then he can't think at all. His head feels clogged, and then it feels empty.

He's stopped straining against the ties, and the material sits slack and damp across his face.

"Will."

The pressure falls from his nose. Will's breath doesn't return in a gasp or a gulp, but a shaking trail, mucous wet and barely adequate to reach the starving alveoli of his lungs. His mouth is still covered, the rubberised plastic rippling at his teeth.

Feeling returns to him in bursts, from the swelling numbness in his fingertips to the sensitivity of his cock, being gently teased to fullness by Hannibal's warm fingers.

"Nothing that is happening," Hannibal tells him, his breath damp against Will's neck, "Is anything that you're in control of."

Will tries to nod, tries to make a gesture, anything, to say that he understands. His breathing only gets lighter, humming against his sinuses.

"And that is fine," Hannibal tells him, and then there's something wet on his neck, like a tongue. Then it's sharp, like teeth, and Will feels his veins jump at the touch as his faltering air stops again, trapped and shuttered inside him.

Wetness envelopes the head of his cock and this is wasted, Will thinks, because he can't *feel* it, not fully, can't see the bow of lips around him, and his whole body is a battle of restraint and release and now, now he's scared, because if Hannibal's *there*, then he can't pull the damn fabric from his face, can't stop him from choking. Sweat pools in the well of his clavicle, and he feels like boiling water. He's making a sound, he knows; can feel it rising through his throat like sand, feels it scraping against him, urgent, and stoppered.

There's cold air against the damp head of his cock, and surely, surely now Hannibal knows to give him air, stop those burning pricks of pain in his eyes from blotting him out completely.

He can't count seconds, or moments. Can't pull any harder at his wrists. He can only push back against the hand on his chest and feel the fight in him sinking into some dark and unreachable place as Hannibal opens the wrappings on his face once more, permits him the lightest touch of life.

"Stop trying to be in control," Hannibal reminds him, and this, Will thinks, is moot. The options for any modicum of ownership of his situation have been thoroughly forsaken, and he's inhaling nothing but mucous and his throat stings with it, and his eyes feel puffed with saline and he thinks he wants this to stop, but there's that pressure on his dick that keeps his body pinned to life.

This time, Hannibal grips at his buttocks as he kneels, taking all of Will into him, catching the head of him in the depth of his throat and sucking the pulse from Will's arteries.

Will can't feel his legs, is only held upright by the joins of his wrists and the wraps across his face, but he can feel this, just. His lungs are swollen, pushing against the wall of his chest and he's aching, spinning and falling all at once. And he's remembering what Hannibal's been telling him. That whatever happens, he's not the one in control of it.

He doesn't know if he's holding on, or if the supply of oxygen to his blood is too thin, but he can't let go, can't come like this. He's trapped. Cocooned, consumed, and he's drowning inside Hannibal.

There are worse ways to go, he thinks.

Something shifts, around him, or in him, and he's not sure where the sensations are coming from, only that they're *there*. Hannibal's throat becomes a vacuum, and he feels something drop from him, like a plug being pulled. Like a dam being smashed.

He's coming, and it feels too *loose*; the last of his strength pushing in a spurt that echoes through his body, roaring in his chest, and what comes out of him feels less like an orgasm than the relief of pissing; like something needed, not rewarded.

He can hear Hannibal swallowing, the wet contractions of muscles working to take him in, and his breath still eludes him. The shuffle of limbs takes too long and Will feels himself wilting against his restraints, feels blackness sinking into him, and he realises, somehow, that this is *okay*.

When he comes to, he's still standing, and boneless. Hannibal is pressed against him, his mouth suckered against his jaw. There's air in his lungs, an abundance of it, wheezing into him in huge, gulping breaths. There's a handkerchief in Hannibal's hands, and the makeshift blindfold is pooled on the floor. Will wonders if the tie is ruined, and then he wonders what's supposed to happen next. His hands are still tied behind him.

"Tell me how you feel."

Will tests his voice to answer, and his first two attempts are only coughing; thick, clogged chokes of gravelled air that don't clear the path of his heavy tongue.

"I thought," he manages, "That this wasn't therapy."

"That doesn't mean it can't be therapeutic."

There's that low discomfort creeping back into Will's stomach, weighing down the aftermath of what should be euphoria. This is too much about *him* to feel like something shared. The tentative release feels tainted, already, with heaviness, with guilt, and with uncertainty.

"Do you feel grounded, in this moment?" Hannibal prompts.

Will considers this, swallowing saliva into his throat to quell the burning.

"I feel floored," he answers.

It feels like the wrong answer, somehow. The way that Hannibal regards him, considered and controlled, it makes Will feel like the subject of a test. Like a patient.

"Would you care to elaborate?" Hannibal asks, and Will can't guess, from this, what Hannibal wants. He can feel the press of his erection against his thigh, can see the thinnest of sheens on Hannibal's skin, but nothing that's happened has given Hannibal, to his mind, anything he can use.

"What were *you* hoping to achieve?" he asks Hannibal. "For you?"

Already, Will's mind is reconnecting threads, linking the experiences back to Hannibal's demands to think of the dead, to think of relinquishing control, and all Will can think is that if he was the one playing dead, then Hannibal must be the one playing murderer. There's that incongruity, again, shifting the tone of events into something Will can't elucidate.

"I believed our needs and interests to be complimentary," Hannibal says, and he's undoing the knots holding Will's arms to the pillar. "This bothers you."

It bothers Will, because he can't see the distinction between Hannibal *helping* him, and Hannibal revelling in the power he holds over him. Neither option reassures him, though only one of them causes the spent muscles in his groin to spasm weakly in reawakened curiosity.

"It bothers me to think of your motives as entirely altruistic," Will says. It's a truth, mostly. It's one that blocks the other truth from teetering at his consciousness. He stumbles away from the pillar as his wrists fall free, and Hannibal is in front of him, holding him, before he can sway any further from balance.

"I can assure you my motives were not unselfish."

"I haven't…given you anything," Will says, hesitant. Aware that he's entered into something potentially more demanding than anything he ever agreed to with the FBI.

"Yet," says Hannibal. "Do you remember what I told you?"

There's a lot that Hannibal's told him, though somehow none of it is quite enough. Will chances at plucking out the most salient information, the thing that's infusing his gut with a fresh hot ache at the chance to embrace it.

"That you are orchestrating this in its entirety," Will says, letting Hannibal pull the shirt from his shoulders and buckling into the touch of his hands pushing his pants down his thighs.

"Quite."

Will reaches for a button on Hannibal's shirt, a small nod towards reciprocity, and the touch is denied him, pushed away. Instead, he's led to the desk, clear but for the opened black box.

"What happens is beyond your means to influence or to stop," Hannibal tells him, the line of his trousers altered considerably by his arousal.

Will doesn't think he'd want it to stop, but he's also thinking that he doesn't want to drown, again. Doesn't want his head held full of regurgitated air. He doesn't think that he wants to trust Hannibal, but he doesn't want to be given the choice not to.

The realisation swells inside him, something ugly in its helplessness but so utterly tempting.

He steps out of his shoes at Hannibal's command, then shucks off the puddle of fabric from his pants until he's naked, shifting under Hannibal's touch as he's positioned with his dick level to Hannibal's desk, the head of it nudging against the cool wood.

"Open your legs, and stand on your toes."

Black ribbons snake around Will's ankles, wrapping each firmly to the base of the desk, his weight dutifully balanced on the balls of his foot.

"Don't lean."

Will denies himself the support of the table, legs trembling in their splayed position. His balance falters and he feels his heel dropping, only it's caught by the ribbon, still held elevated some inches above the ground.

"Do you feel powerless, Will?"

Will doesn't. He feels strong, this way; holding himself upright, his arms obediently still and his legs, quaking but still supporting him. If he's honest with himself, what he feels is something like pride; the gentle kind of affirmation that he's handling adversity, no matter how minor, with grace.

"I still feel in control of an ever reducing set of variables," he tells Hannibal.

Hannibal says nothing, only stands behind Will and pinches each wrist inside his hands. He twists them behind Will's back, fingertips to elbow, pinioning them in the middle and reaching for the thick black ribbons.

"And now?" Hannibal asks, the first knot secured and the second wrapping loops into the crook of Will's elbow. "Does the idea that you're allowing this afford you that same confidence?"

"It's that I don't feel afraid," Will says. "Not of being…not of you."

It's the wrong thing to say.

What Will meant was, that his fear in those scenes is not of being the victim, not really. He knows he can endure, and he knows too that one day, he will die. His fear is at the concentration of malicious intent that sits so heavily in those scenes, that he siphons into his brain and reimagines. His fear is that he's forgetting how to siphon it back out, afterwards. That he's trapped Garrett Jacob Hobbs inside his skull, that he's got Eldon Stammets in there too, got all of them burrowing holes into him until he's not strong enough to push them outside.

Hannibal uses the tethered bar of Will's arms as a lever, and shoves him, forward, and hard.

There's a crack as Will's nose hits the desk, and then there's a rivulet of red leaking back through Will's throat, colouring his teeth with salt and metal.

"Of course not," Hannibal says, lifting Will's head by a fistful of hair, pushing a red, plum-sized ball between Will's teeth, stoppering the startled sound of protest. "You're afraid of you. I'm merely removing your influence from this equation."

He fixes the clasp of the gag at the nape of Will's neck, satisfied when Will has to stretch his mouth to let air pass through it, frowning lightly at the sputtered spray of blood from Will's nose.

Next, he threads ribbon across Will's neck in a loop. Each end of the ribbon is fixed to the front legs of the desk in tidy knots.

"You'll do well to keep your head down," Hannibal comments, demonstrating with a finger at the back of Will's neck what might happen if he were to move with any enthusiasm. Will's airways momentarily crush, and without a way to communicate agreement, he remains still but for the shaking in his legs.

Another wrap of ribbon slides beneath Will's stomach, doubles back around his arms, and joins the ties at the front of the desk and this, Will thinks, is superfluous. They've established, fully, that there is no way for Will to safely move from his position. The acceptance of this pushes Will's cock more fully onto the table's ridge and he tries to lift himself up to accommodate it, and then he tries not to feel the flush of humiliation in how he's presenting himself to Hannibal, his ass a waiting target.

"There is nothing you can do which will affect the outcome of this," Hannibal tells him, rolling his sleeves. "I want you to concentrate on how this feels," he says, and he's dropping to his knees behind Will, his hands pressing against the back of Will's thighs.

"When you feel yourself getting lost, you'll come back to me. Whatever you do, or try to, you can't hurt me, Will."

Will knows this, fully and clearly. He can't do *anything*.

Hannibal's mouth suckers onto the meat of Will's backside, grinding teeth against the soft skin. Will flinches at the slow bursting of blood vessels, shuddering into the desk. Then, there's cool air against the saliva-wet bruise. Hannibal bites again, on the other side. His mouth stays fixed to the spot for long enough to draw speckles of blood out, and for Will's feet to skid against the floor before righting themselves in their pinned balance. Hannibal's teeth work across him, nipping and tugging at the flesh until Will's toes cramp and fold beneath him. The air is littered with shuttered, spittle-wet gasps, pushed from the sides of the smooth gag as Hannibal trails his tongue into the cleft of Will's ass and licks across the tensed muscles of his hole.

Will tries to jerk as saliva pools around him, and Hannibal's tongue *crawls* around the tight edges, pushes in and creeps against nerves, driving past each reluctant spasm and then withdrawing, savouring each flinch.

If Will had voice right now, he's not sure he'd use it to plea for more, or for it to stop.

Fingernails gouge into the hot skin of his hips, clawing and scoring lines as Hannibal uses his tongue to unravel Will from the inside.

He loosens in increments, pulling himself in only when Hannibal withdraws to bite, and then, then all Will can do is flinch, the ribbon sitting too close against his throat to risk anything more reactive.

Tongue recedes, flicking across shaking skin, and Will's mouth is full of the taste of congealed blood, like ink spilling from a pen, never to make the page. His breath is tight

again, stuck against the corners of his mouth and his nose too full of red. Hannibal's hands are on his hips, pulling his cock from the table's edge, then pressing, slow, until the ridge of wood is a line above his aching balls and his cock rests, trapped, beneath his stomach.

"Do you feel powerful now?" Hannibal asks, and the head of his cock is wet against Will's hole.

Will feels anything but and he knows that this is the point. He's stretched, desperate, an ember burning out.

He tilts his head, as close as he can get to saying "no." Sweat falls in splashes from his forehead.

Hannibal doesn't seem to notice, only drives himself forward, into Will, faster than his tongue, and he's so, so much fuller.

If Will shifts forward to escape the blunt pressure against his prostate, he bruises the tautened skin beneath his cock. If he pushes back, he's impaling himself further than he thinks he can tolerate. He moans into the gag, and resolves to stay as still as Hannibal's steady shunting will allow.

Hannibal murmurs something Will can't hear, or can't understand, lost in the sound of blood ringing through his ears and his chest clenching with the effects of hyperventilation.

The speed increases, and with it the blunt impact of skin against wood and everything's too full, too trapped. There's a hand in Will's hair and it's twisting through the roots, curling and tugging. His cock springs free of the table's edge, and now that's enveloped too, and Will thinks of being buried, alive; choked and stuttering on earth. His insides scream as friction scrapes at his prostate. The ribbon across his neck tightens as his head is lifted from the desk. He's burning; breathless and annihilated under Hannibal's control, and he's thinking of those bodies in his slideshow, the moment when they accepted there was nothing to be gained from clamouring after life. Will's choking, now. The ribbon feels more like a noose and he feels like he's swinging, only Hannibal's pushed inside him too deep.

"Give in, Will."

And Will's thinking of that killer, the one who wrung out life for his own pleasure, and Hannibal's got his hand on his cock and he's pushing at the head. *Give in.* Hold on. *Let it happen.*

Hannibal bursts inside him and that – that's enough. Will thinks he understands what is to want this; to revel in the breaking of a body, and he feels broken as he comes. A spurt, and a drizzle, and a hot soreness that's swallowing him.

Then, he's empty.

Hannibal pushes his head down, slowly, this time. His breath falls ragged in Will's hair and the cloth of his shirt presses against Will's back. The gag is unclasped, and Will watches as

the ball trails mucous and blood from its shining surface, waiting for Hannibal to wipe the desk dry before he coughs, and rests his cheek on the smooth wooden surface.

“Will?”

Will doesn’t know what to say, so he lets the sound of breathing answer for him; thick, hungry gulps of air into lungs that still clench and struggle to inflate.

“You’d make a beautiful ornament,” Hannibal tells him, his voice so soft it’s barely audible. Will has no desire to be merely ornamental, nor entirely passive. His shoulders ache with their confinement, and he’s stiff, sore and burnt out. His feet are no longer holding him; his weight now held by his ribs against the table, and his ankles chafing against the ribbons.

He hears Hannibal retreat, and panic rises in his throat at the sound of retreating steps until he reminds himself that there is nothing he can do to change the outcome. He’s tensing, still; finding ways to ease the balance of his body now the promise of pleasure has left and all that remains is endurance. It’s thirty eight breaths – he’s counted each with renewed gratitude – until Hannibal returns, bearing ice which he applies to his throbbing nose.

“I’d very much like to draw you,” Hannibal tells him, stroking hair from his face, and Will doesn’t so much feel controlled as utterly, entirely possessed. “But I think perhaps next time.”

Will calms as Hannibal raises a scalpel to slice through each ribbon, folding into Hannibal’s arms as he’s lifted, carried to the chaise longue and laid out like a sculpture gradually coming to life. He’s given the ice to hold, wrapped in cloth and dripping water across his face.

When Hannibal kisses his forehead through the water, it feels like a brand. Will accepts it, embraces it, and lets himself fall into it.

*

It’s three days later when Will’s called to his next scene; a motel room, flayed guests, wire and vomit. He lets the horror of it swell inside his skin, lets it touch each part of his mind as he lays in the middle of it, basking in the nightmare that’s his to interpret. His breath hitches, once, and it’s enough; he’s not responsible for what’s happened, for what’s happening. The violence blooms inside him as he reconstructs each score of flesh, and this time, he’s not fighting the associations.

Beverly sees him, then; sees the way he opens his eyes to lucidity without a tremble, and she hears his breath steady, even. She doesn’t see the way Will covers himself, turns to conceal the tension in his pants. She just listens to the way Will dissects the scene into its components, the forensic evidence already gathered, and for the first time since she’s known Will, she thinks he might doing better.

Will smiles, and it's still a crooked, awkward thing, still dampened by fever. He's got Hannibal's voice nestled in the back of his skull, telling him that whatever horror he's seeing, however he's feeling, he's blameless. He hears Hannibal telling him that he could have wielded the very blade that tore the skin from muscle, and still, he would not have been responsible. He listens to the echoes as they roll through him, and takes comfort in the knowledge that whatever transpires, he's utterly powerless to affect any outcome over it. And he feels his own body responding, reminding him that that's just fine.

End Notes

I'm trying to write sweet things. I really, really am.

[Title stolen from a Godspeed You! Black Emperor track, largely due to a haemorrhaging of imagination]

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